

British actress Honor Blackman dies at 94: ‘I have always been a daredevil’

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Honor Blackman, who has died aged 94, deserves some mention. She will forever be known for having played a “[James] Bond girl,” in *Goldfinger* (1964), but she was never subordinate or vacuous in glamorous roles. In her words, “Most of the Bond girls have been bimbos. I have never been a bimbo.”

Blackman’s feisty independence and intelligence were refreshing and even inspiring, and the product of her upbringing. Born in 1925 in Plaistow, east London, into a lower middle class family, she was often critical of her World War I veteran father Frederick, an ambitious civil service statistician, for driving his four children relentlessly. Later in life, she attempted to see positives in his strictness and hypercritical treatment, asserting her “Self-discipline, the ability to work and order my life come from him ... What’s done is done and you can’t bemoan the past.”

Frederick wanted his children to have the opportunities he felt he had not. She was very close to her only brother Ken. When Ken was bullied at school, Frederick taught him how to box, with the result that Honor learned too, picking up “a pearler of a right uppercut.”

The physical daring was apparent, but so was a determined self-sufficiency. Aged about 10, “I knocked out two boys. I just can’t bear bullies.”

Frederick always felt he was passed over for promotion because of his cockney accent, and for Honor’s 16th birthday, he offered her the choice between a bicycle and elocution lessons. She later explained, laughing, “God help me if I’d chosen the bicycle.”

The result was an elocution teacher who introduced her to poetry and drama and convinced Frederick that Honor had talent. The family budget stretched to one evening a week’s attendance at Guildhall School of Music and Drama from 1940.

Honor was by now working as a Home Office filing clerk, doubling as a wartime motorcycle dispatch rider. She was nicknamed “Top Gear Tessie.”

Her first stage work came in 1946, appearing as an understudy in the West End production of Warren Chetham-

Strode’s *The Guinea Pig*. She made an uncredited screen debut in Roy Boulting’s *Fame Is the Spur* (1947). Rather typically, she was almost trampled by a horse during the shoot, but continued undaunted.

Film company the Rank Organisation took Blackman onto their Company of Youth, to promote young actors. Emphasising her recognition of her own abilities, Blackman was at pains to note that this was not the charm school, where people were “picked off the street and hadn’t had any training, at ten pounds a week. And I was picked off the West End stage, at a hundred pounds a week.”

She made a string of films through the following decade, of which the best-known is probably Roy Ward Baker’s film about the Titanic, *A Night to Remember* (1958).

There were two decent films with Dirk Bogarde, the “Alien Corn” segment of the W. Somerset Maugham portmanteau *Quartet* (Harold French, 1948) and Anthony Darnborough and Terence Fisher’s intriguing *So Long at the Fair* (1950), also with Jean Simmons. Lance Comfort’s *Daughter of Darkness* (1948), with Siobhan McKenna, something of a Gothic oddity, is worth noting too. In *Green Grow the Rushes* (1951, Derek Twist), Blackman co-starred with an equally youthful Richard Burton, in one of his first featured performances.

With the brisk efficiency of her upbringing, she was not given to public anguish, but it is clear that this was not an easy period. Her first husband forced her to emigrate to Canada and stripped their joint account of her earnings. They divorced in 1956.

Furthermore, Blackman later described herself as “unversed” in the ways of the world when she began performing, explaining she should have had a different agent: “In those days they didn’t care about your career, just about earning money.”

This, coupled with her husband’s plunder, may have driven her to take more television work. It may also have contributed to what she later described as “a dip” which began as a bout of stage-fright and ended with three weeks’ hospitalisation.

She was still turning in some fine performances, such as her wry and poised Hera in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), notable for Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion animation. Blackman was still not yet fully recovered in 1962 when she auditioned for *The Avengers*, although the self-assurance was there for producer Leonard White. He told her she would have to do judo and asked whether she knew anything about it. No, she said, "Nothing. You'd have to teach me."

They did, and it was Blackman who encouraged them actually to use it onscreen in her part as anthropologist and martial artist Dr. Cathy Gale. This may have played its part in developing the show's breezy action. One early script mentioned Cathy reaching into her bag for a gun. Blackman later commented, "Now every woman knows... that if we reach into our handbags for something, 10 minutes later we find it. I would have been dead as a dodo." She suggested judo instead.

The choice was reckless, and she attributed her later scoliosis to doing judo on a concrete studio floor. It sped up the show's action, however, and gave Cathy Gale additional authority.

Blackman's character, who did the lion's share of the fighting on the series, was unlike anything seen on British television before. The show was a hit, and Blackman and co-star Patrick Macnee made a forgettable kitsch single, "Kinky Boots." She recorded more interesting material off its success, including "Men Will Deceive You," a creditable cover of Serge Gainsbourg's "La Javanaise." Blackman appeared in 43 episodes of *The Avengers* from 1962 to 1964.

The television series led Bond producer Albert R. Broccoli to seek her out as Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* (Guy Hamilton, 1964) with Sean Connery—a film project for which she left *The Avengers*, to be replaced by Diana Rigg. At 39, five years older than Connery, she became the oldest Bond actress thus far. She was the perfect mix of glamour and cool self-confidence.

Even if the material was slim, it was an engaging performance. Broccoli's appraisal was spot on: "The Brits would love her because they knew her as Mrs. Gale, the Yanks would like her because she was so good, it was a perfect combination."

The international recognition, however, did not lead to much development of her film career. She continued to give excellent performances in some interesting films, like Peter Collinson's psychological horror *Fright* (1971), but high-profile star work did not happen.

There were a couple of other films with Connery, including Edward Dmytryk's patchy Western *Shalako* (1968), but at 40 she was already being overlooked in favour of younger stars. She was blunt about it: "We have all these

older men with their guts hanging out still acting—they can barely put their belts round their stomach so have to belt up round their crotch—and they all carry on getting roles and are accepted and praised, whereas older women are given rather boring parts or are cut off at their prime."

But she continued to work. On television she became a reliable turn in sitcoms, and she was noticeably successful in West End runs of Broadway musicals like *The Sound of Music* (1981). She delighted in the rigours of such performances, playing Mrs. Higgins in *My Fair Lady* (2006) and the landlady Fräulein Schneider in *Cabaret* (2007).

She was asked if the latter's eight-show-a-week schedule, after only two weeks' rehearsal, was not too demanding. The character, said Blackman, is "a survivor, and so am I... I can do the job. That's what matters. I'm glad people are grown up enough now to acknowledge that you're not necessarily on the rubbish heap if you're a woman over 50."

Film work did come in again, and she continued to give excellent performances in variable pictures. She is excellent in Matthias Hoene's comedy horror *Cockneys vs Zombies* (2012), a sometimes clumsy if entertaining satire on the gentrification of working class east London.

Politically, she remained a committed Liberal. A supporter of the anti-monarchy campaign group Republic, she turned down a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire), saying "since I'm a republican I thought it would be somewhat hypocritical."

She compared this unfavourably with Sean Connery, "who accepts a knighthood but never comes here, doesn't pay tax here... But I don't think he thinks deeply about politics."

The comment about his taxes goes to the core of her liberalism, which demanded a decency it could not deliver politically. In a 2014 Channel 5 report on "Growing Old in Britain" she advised a group of older women not to become obese because of unnecessary increased demands on taxpayers. That year she campaigned for compensation for those who lost pension funds when insurer Equitable Life collapsed.

That well-intentioned decency, coupled with self-assurance and a refusal to be undermined, also marked out what was appealing in her work.



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